

Disabled veterans and veterans with service-connected disabilities: are they the same?

Charlotte M. Irby

What is a disability? For the general population, the answer is not a simple one. However, for veterans with a service-connected disability, the answer may be even more complicated.

Over the years, the definition of disability has often changed. The American Community Survey (ACS), of the U.S. Census Bureau, measures two distinct concepts of disability: one is functional disabilities and difficulty with daily living, and the other is service-connected disability status and compensation ratings of veterans. However, as Kelly Ann Holder points out in [“The disability of veterans”](#) (U.S. Census Bureau, Washington, DC, January 14, 2016), these two concepts, in reference to veterans, “are often confused or conflated.” Holder investigates how these concepts relate to each other. She goes on to further explore an even more important concern, “Is a veteran with a service-connected disability the same as a disabled veteran?”

To attempt to answer this question, the author first compares the two sets of questions that ACS addressed in defining a disability. In the first set, ACS revised the questions so that disability was defined on the basis of six functional limitations and their effect on activities of daily living. These limitations were hearing, vision, cognitive, ambulatory, self-care, and independent-living difficulties. In 2008, the ACS added a second set of questions for determining disabilities of service-connected veterans. These questions addressed veterans’ service-related disability statuses and ratings. This second set was added so that the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) could use these disability ratings to determine which veterans were eligible for priority VA healthcare services.

Next, Holder reviews the levels of disability of veterans by age and period of service, the number and types of disabilities, and whether the disabilities are ACS defined or service connected. She compares the data with those of other veterans and nonveterans. Some of her major findings were that veterans of all ages had a higher percentage of disabilities than did nonveterans and that veterans with a service-connected disability did not always have an ACS-defined disability. She also found that veterans who were rated as having a 50-percent or higher service disability were more likely to have more than one disability and were more likely to have an ACS-defined disability. In addition, younger veterans who served in the most recent wars, such as the Gulf War, had higher percentages of service-connected disabilities than did veterans of other service periods.

The author concludes that the concept of ACS-defined disabilities is correlated to the concept of VA-rated or service-connected disabilities; however, they are different concepts and are not interchangeable. A veteran may have a service-connected disability but no ACS-defined disability, an ACS-defined disability but no service-connected disability, only an ACS-defined disability, both service-connected and ACS-defined disabilities, or no disability at all. Some disabilities may have occurred during service and others may not have occurred during

service. In the end, Holder recommends that one “use caution” when determining whether someone is a disabled veteran or a veteran with a service-connected disability.